

# **Zones of the Coalfield Interior**

by Steven Hitchins

## Zones of the Coalfield Interior: Walking and Collage

### 1. Under the familiar, we time rain. Plug ourselves into town. Ferried into iPod. I descend into my Nokia. The blinds of other people's lives.

Sky eats into mountain. Misted oaks. Dark mass of pine. White triangles of houses, maroon slate indented into woods. Dim bulbs through the blinds of satellite flats. As I'm tapping these words into my Nokia, the letters balloon into warped hieroglyphs as raindrops bead down the screen. Why do they attract me, these low-watt glows through glass in rain? Striplight stairwells. That slightly off-yellow electric light. The rain outside. Just the suggestion of other people's lives. I think I love the fragility of these lonely spaces amid the elements. The contrast, the juxtaposition. Familiar comforts displaced in wilderness. That spooky melancholy. I descend into town. Under the rail bridge. Thinking about walking and collage. These are my methods: walk about, write things down, cut them up. Why do I walk? Walking's how you get to know a place. We're all plumbed into iPods, ferried in and out of the city. Maybe we've lost our connection to place and need to walk about more to reconnect. But a place quickly becomes familiar. Moss-blackened yellowbrick. Calamine shitsplats. A lot of the time I don't take things in. Tune out on the iPod, worry about poetry. I'm always elsewhere. Walking into town I don't even have to think. Memory markers just glide me in. Maybe you need this familiarity. The modern world's disorientating enough. Deep echo of pigeons between girders. So what's the need for collage? Why do I need to disorientate and defamiliarise things? Being lost can be truly panic-frying. Daytime headlights. Jabber of engines. Muffled bass. But disorientation is pleasurable. Going to a place you've never been before. A need for the unfamiliar. We travel to foreign lands, to stay in anonymous hotels, to relax. Plug ourselves into iPods because travelling the same route every day numbs us to our locality. We need a bit of disjuncture. Just placing things that don't go together side by side. That's what collage does. You see things differently when you're lost. Bottom of hill a buckled sign:

Gwyriad

Diversion



### 2. Poetry always was the said up backwards. I shelter in the echo of time. Spaces seem to lose their routes, become unsure of transitions.

I shelter in the train station foyer. What is it about this space? Is it the light, that limy light from the huge saucer bulbs up in the girders? Or the tall glass front with Arriva printed in large letters? The stone steps go up a tiled L-shape channel to the platforms and I love the echo of this magnificent instrument. Reverbed foot-stamps. Crutch ticks. Clunk and clash of buggy wheels tugged up backwards. Drippers beat. It's a space of transitions. A ghost

space you just pass through. An in-between place. Junction where routes intersect. People come and go. Reflections in paving. Taxi drivers and pigeons are relative constants. Taxi drivers with earplug phones leaning against black Vauxhall Vectras. Do you know what he said to me he said um. No Rob turned around to me he said um. I'm fine I'm in the caff now. I sit in Café Royale copying these notes from mobile to notepad. Why return to a poetry of place now? Why focus on my local area? We live in a globalised world. This rooting-in could be dangerously insular. Is it nostalgia for some illusory past? Fear that there's no local anymore. The valleys always were shantytown collage places. The mines drew migrants from all over Wales, from England, Ireland, Scotland, from Italy, Spain, Russia, Poland. The valleys always were multiple: even the name is plural. How's Anthony after Monday he alright. See you tomorrow I expect if they all turn up. The mining industry might also be seen as a victim of globalisation. Wales fuelling the engines of imperialism. Globalisation as the breakdown of that nation-state model. Change to oil during WW1. Need for modernisation. Unable to compete with new fuels, new markets. Too early for me. Oh there we are. I'll be on the twenty-five to. Now that industry has receded, nature moves back in around us, leaving these lonely outposts as terminal moraine. Urban spaces set amidst the rural, settlements in the hills. The valleys as frontier zone. She've had it done have she. Oh good. Is my cannibalising of the past complicit with this movement? No real connection to the past. All pasts available as materials to consume. Disrupt local chronologies. Bring together disparate places. Displace communities. Keep the workforce mobile. And if the valleys is and always was a mish-mash, is there any need to cut it up further? Maybe it's that lost frontier world feeling of the original black gold rush that draws me to these desolate postindustrial spaces today. In my collages it's as if I'm trying to concoct artificial wildernesses out of my urban experience. Finding the exotic within the local. Inventing empty spaces. Listen um they fixed your bench.

### **3. I cross the collage. Walking in the names and dreams. White canisters without depth. We are colours not their value.**

Win a holiday up to £2000 when you loan against your gold, watches & jewellery. Come on in. He got in and he went nuts. Always buying bedding you are you buy a lot of bedding. Pay a little bit at a time. Manager's Special £. Quick & simple credit. They come there and they try to think that they're better than you like. Oh dear oh dear there you are see. I cross the street, magnetised by the window display at Savers. The arrays of bottles and tubes, the names and colours. Look at that, in our shop it's two twenty-nine a little one, innit. Deodorants. Lynx Excite: purple on black. Lynx Dark Temptation: gold on black. Lynx Africa: green on black. As soon as I wake up every night every day I know that it's you I need to take these blues away. I drift through the empty, overlit aisles. Is Savers a collage? Is this what collage achieves? Everything available for consumption. Homogenised material. Random juxtaposition. Words lose their meaning, become pure logo. Flat surface. The aisles of the poem as blank shelves of words without depth. Space-age sterility. Spicy bleach tingle. That chemical bouquet. Dove spray in slender white canisters with different colour caps. Fuschia: pomegranate & lemon verbena. Yellow: grapefruit & lemongrass. Silver:

invisible dry. Olive: dead sea minerals. Green: cucumber & tea tree. Pink: beauty finish. But Saver's isn't really a collage. Or not quite how I'd want it. Because there is still a ground here, that gives things meaning, and that's capital, exchange value. Shops are clever: how you see the products not the shelves, how you see the colours not the bottles. The shop is a space of fictions, fantasies, dreams. Translucent bulbs of Fairy liquid. Creamy blockpacks of soap. But now the products look at me dumbly. With nobody shopping, they seem to lose their value. That comforting layer is stripped away. Like materials in a collage they are removed from their usual function. And I'm suddenly aware that I'm walking around a hollowed-out living room, painted white and lined with white metal shelves. It's like I'm in a gallery, a museum of displaced objects. Pillars of Velvet and Plenty. Plush rolls sheathed in polythene. When properly emptied of meaning, they become disturbing. They seem to stop being commodities and become interesting and mysterious. I think that's the difference between collage and consumerism. Unlike the other desolate spaces I've visited, the objects here, though disparate, retain a fine layer of value, that very shallow depth, threading them together, as commodities. Savers isn't quite a zone until it's empty. Neon slabs of Daz.

#### **4. How we go. To make a static table. A steel texting. Huddled around polystyrene cups of sepia image of speech in motion.**

Steamed bus windows. Dieselmutter. Fair enough but. That was all and I went. At the bus station forecourt I sit on a steel strut chair at a metal picnic table to watch the space and time tangle. Bearing in mind. And he said. So anyway. Does collage neutralise time? Make it static? Is my poetry just an offshoot of the heritage industry? A smorgasbord of sepia images. All times spread out before me for my amusement. Backs of shops, battered paint. Buddleia aerials spoke out of chimney. No I know I'm like. Except the heritage industry seems to cordon the past off. To make it safe by working to retain a chronological image of time. That's what collage disrupts. History isn't a series of events in order. We are in it. We find our way. The past as active, alive. Time becomes space, a landscape. Cigarette smoke. Coffee clouds. At the same time, it's a reactivation of space. The space in motion, constantly changing. Not a static thing we just pass through. It moves with us. Even when it seems still, it's moving through time. Didn't you sleep last night, Sue? Come on then, one step, there we go. Walking's not the A to B. Not the straightforward linear routes I'd thought. That's the image we get from maps but when you're in a place you don't have any vantage. It's more like a collage. You're immersed. You make your own connections. Walking is writing with space; placing is the poem. How we locate ourselves, find our way. I want to read each movement in this space like a snippet of speech in language. Fag butt smoulders in foil ashtray. Pigeon hunched on canopy beam. Can't remember what ones I had last time. Lit-up tubes, jazzy carpet seats, yellow poles. Reversing bleeps. Driver with pen in mouth or arms on steering wheel texting. Girl untangles headphones. Worst thing you can only have two of these a day. Huddled around polystyrene cups of steam.

**5. Loosen the objects and become myself flat colour. Maybe a skyblue crater. The objects in its sag. Soddently enigmatic. They are in the syntax of season.**

I breathe deep into Ynysangharad Park to dislodge the passive smoke nestled in my bronchioles. There is a map at the entrance. I said maps make space seem linear. Not how it really is. But for some reason I'm drawn to it. The prime zones are shown as patches of flat colour: Pitch & Putt Golf Course, Playground & Pool Area, Patio Café, The Sunken Gardens, Tennis Courts, Pavilion, Bandstand, Wild Zone. The names are an invite to adventure. Maybe it's the gap between the flat map and being in the space that makes you wonder and dream. I imagine walking through those places. I see myself from above. Rain pools around the swings. Blackbird flute swirls. The outdoor pool a skyblue crater. There's something strange about the park too when it's closed or out of season. I stand here, rain plopping from maple leaves onto my hood. The spooky sensation of being in a place when there's no-one else around. Green metal shutters. Exit. Entrance. Like in Savers, the objects become mysterious. Seem to look back at you. Patio Café · Caff Patio. Cornetto, Solero, Magnum, Calipo. My attraction to these empty spaces seems to be not to do with the physicality of the space but the ambience. Maybe a space isn't just the objects in it but how you read them and feel them. Maybe somehow we affect the space we are in; give the objects meaning. And when the situations change, the objects' values can too. When the park is empty I become unsure of the meaning of things. Sodden picnic bench-tables dotted with pink petal skins. A bin painted like a Twister lolly lies on its side, the base filled with rain. Like displaced snippets of text in a collage, they are suddenly enigmatic and compelling, filled with possibilities, weighted with unknown significance. In the puddled tennis courts, damp nets sag. On the flooded path, a woman with an umbrella talks on mobile as she high-heels from one island of dry tarmac to another. I said, What? Says it as it is. Oh whatever, whatever. I try to walk like I'm not going anywhere. Loosen the syntax of the route. The pavilion is shuttered dark. Faded pink Walls lollyboard outside. But it does bother me. Seagulls line the cricket green. Yeah but she knows she did it. Yellow and red golf flags lean. Well that's exactly what she said to me she said. A duck on the putting green. Jackdaws.

## Zones of the Coalfield Interior 2: Poetries of Coal

### 1. We are formations. Baked poetry geologically. Shuffle the valleys just as the rocks. Tobacco fish. Breakfast curry yeah.

Not last week but the week before last. On billboard: INZ MATO CHUP. Man with tobacco yellow moustache sucks a pipe on taxi bonnet. Those buggers had it easy. Writing about the valleys I wanted the poetry to be like coal. To come into being like natural formations. Layers and strata of words. Poetry as a geological process. Yeah exactly yeah. For God sake John I said. Cut the page into squares or cut out individual words. Shuffle and recombine them at random. You found it then where's it by. Felt-tipped sign in Pizza Plus window: We are serving breakfast now. I generally find that the word-combinations that result are more interesting and surprising than ones I come up with deliberately. Baked potatoes fish chips sausage bacon pie pasty rissole gravy curry beans peas egg. Look at him sticking that in his pocket. Sometimes I think of myself as 'mining' language, 'excavating' vocabularies from geology textbooks and industrial novels. Mr Chips traditional fish and chips kebabs burgers eat in or takeaway. Halal. Under new management. The valleys are formed out of textual strata. The literature of the industrial era shapes how we think about the valleys just as the rocks define them physically. We repair mobiles. Play Here. Love Winning. Payzone. Well like I said before Vanessa you know our family I saw John the other day.

### 2. Debris accumulates in his pocket. It eats lakes. Sealing skin outside Co-op. Collage bridge town superimposed. KitKat ferns.

20 ZONE PARTH. Top up your salad for summer. Modern offices available to let. I imagine the valleys as a zone like William Burroughs' Interzone. Coal mines seem to open some sort of interface between civilisation and nature. Miners chip fossils of prehistoric ferns and horse-tails out of the coal seams. I think of the rocks as records of ancient worlds. The landscapes as fossilised time. Mining them would allow prehistoric spaces to erupt into the present, superimposed times vibrating in the same space. It's like you don't even show any skin off. A boy eats roast chicken Walkers and drinks Lucozade outside Co-op. Trousers, I've got loads of, um. Forest debris accumulates in lagoons and shallow lakes. Sand and mud covers the decaying vegetation, sealing it. Sediment fills the lakes until swampy ground lets forest grow up again. Cycles of forest and flood produce the layers of coal. That's nice innit. Taxi driver in vest. Arms sleeved in tattoos. Smoking and eating a sandwich. Sliced white rectangle. I think of the mines as a bridge to an exotic world. I imagine them bringing other times to the surface. The valleys in the carboniferous period were coal forests. The town superimposed with swampland, jungled bogs. Rooney on Rooney my injury hell my weight and my hair. Woman in a wheelchair knits her face around a fag. Ah it must be broke babe. Now our energy sources are hidden. I don't know where the electricity I use is coming from. I forget I'm consuming the earth, the rocks. Collage

brings the valleys' industrial past back to the surface. Reminds me I'm living on the planet, living off the planet. Kitkat PG Tips Kingsmill Birdseye McCains 2 for £1.50 100% extra free more for your money. Girl in a turban sells Big Issues. Big Deals. Big Brands.

### **3. Physical forest store. The electricity I use is miles of paper. Things wind dropped art life. Air knits time cardies. How a gardener needs a 'fate'.**

Hi-Vis jackets, cardies and leopard blouses. Belt-buckles with 'Elvis' written on them. The trouble is you see. Or 'Jack Daniels'. My toes were curled up like that. Or 'Pitbull'. What happens when you allow language to recombine at random? What is randomness? Sometimes people call it 'chance'. Or 'luck', 'coincidence', 'fate', 'accident', 'mistake'. How you can write five numbers on a slip of paper and those same numbers roll out of a lottery machine. How a gardener needs a bit of rain here, a bit of sun there. How you meet someone from the same town thousands of miles from home. Apologies for the closure of this store your nearest store will be. I don't know she didn't say when I'll have to give you a ring. Where have you been all my life where have you been all my life. Lots of things are happening at once, all going in different directions, and the point where they intersect is the instant of chance. Sometimes something happens without our meaning it to. When two things are connected without any deliberate intention we say it's just a coincidence as if it's not a valid connection. But I don't know if I even believe in superstitious notions like 'luck' or 'fate'. So what is it then? What happens when art or poetry is left to 'chance'? Does leaving the construction of the poem up to chance actually allow physical forces to determine the structure? Do you want more gravy love or are you ok? Marcel Duchamp dropped a piece of string and allowed air to blow mesh gauze. Jean Arp glued squares of paper where they fell. Tristan Tzara picked words from a bag. And boosh he's gone. So there you are anyway. It does seem to be like some physical force, or a combination of forces. When you drop words onto a piece of paper, physical forces like gravity, air pressure and wind must all affect the way they arrange on the page. Where's nanny? Do you want me to push him now?

### **4. Swampy theory. I draw metaphors from the sediment. A topological phase spatialises the page. Cut-up in coal gun? Neon basin.**

A robot hamster runs around a wheel. A doll chirps I love you then sings Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star. I draw metaphors from chaos and catastrophe theory. You can use these ideas to visualise a physical process as a shape. A topological phase space shows all possible states of a system at once. A point on the surface represents the state of the system at a point in time. In collage the poem becomes spatialised. Rather than the linear progression from line to line, the disjunctions between words and phrases encourage the reader to make connections around the page. Airguns and insoles. Batteries and bras. On the way down on Saturday she was fucking she was on a mission. Sequined mobile phone covers. Visualise the system as a marble in a bowl. It will tend toward the most stable state: sitting on the bottom of the bowl. That's the basin of attraction. A pattern of behaviour. When conditions change, the

shape of the basin changes. The marble rolls toward the threshold of the basin and drops into a new one. A new state. A change in the system. The coal forest floods, then fills with sediment. When the sediment reaches a certain amount, the threshold is crossed. Swampy conditions allow forest to establish again. Neon yellow, orange and green card with prices felt-tipped in black. It reloads. What, an actual real gun? It's no sacrifice no sacrifice no sacrifice at all. I think of basins of attraction in language as habitual patterns of interpretation. A word has more than one meaning and each of these is a basin of attraction. As a sentence progresses, context makes one basin more attractive than others, so there's less chance of the word taking on another of its meanings. Reason is about maintaining a steady, stable state. Don't pull it. Put them by here look. I'm trying to twist it. Cut-up disrupts habitual patterns. Induces catastrophes. Pushes the system to the threshold. Our interpretative faculties constantly oscillating on the threshold between basins, between meanings. More possibility of slipping into another basin of attraction. Retrieval of correct word bubbles over causing the system to behave erratically. In language's chaotic state, all interpretations are different. Which is poetry. Impossible to predict what the reader will make of the poem. I pick up a little figurine of Elvis in white jumpsuit and sunglasses. Grow Your Own Elvis – grows to 4x in size in water in 72 hours.

**5. Economic crates of the postmodern. Oil notebook with plastic worry snaps.  
Pegged on the rock power taxes. Air free today.**

Kingsize. Rips. Raw. Rizzla. Swan. Ezee. Welsh flag and Playboy lighters. Keep Calm and Carry On. Your face my place. All these natural metaphors worry me. The valleys were shaped by the rocks politically as well as physically. Not just geology but mineral power-struggles. The fall of coal was tied to the rise of oil. Which continues to shape the world today. Hello Steve, can you give us a shout out, we're on the way to Cornwall. Fun snaps – Throw them – Step on them – Drop them. 1979 second OPEC oil crisis increases price of oil. Shah of Iran in exile. Iranian oil exports cease. Confers power on National Union of Miners. The National Coal Board a nationalised industry founded on monopoly. De-monopolise. Cut government spending. Lower taxes. Deregulate industry. Break up organized labour. Auction off government-owned companies. Drive up interest rates. 1980 recession reduces energy demand. Coal Board threatens pit closures. Union threatens strike. Betty Boo tobacco tin. Incense. Bongs. Saint in the kitchen whore in the bedroom. Why don't you all have one each? Baby come home to me baby come home to me. All accounts of the miners' strike have a different take on it. What gets in and what gets left out. Depends on the interests of the person writing it. History doesn't exist as something in the past but as a variety of accounts encountered in the present. I can't experience the miners' strike, only this or that person's take on it. I recognise that none of these tells the full story. So I'm constantly assembling it for myself. But it's impossible to get an overview. I end up with these fragments, disordered bits and notebook pieces. Plastic crates on cardboard boxes. Dole Premium Bananas. Air fresheners, kitchen rolls, foil. All free today free Sky Plus free installation. Personal Injury Claims. Cash Referral Fee. History becomes a series of images to sample. Industrial novels of the valleys consumed with irony. The mining era as a form of

camp. It concerns me that my poetry might just be the postmodern cultural expression of neoliberalist capitalism. There is a strand of naturalism about neoliberal ideas. The market as self-regulating system. Equilibrium of supply and demand. Any constraint on free competition interferes with natural efficiency. Is this the political implication of a chance poetics? Hair extensions pegged on a string. Finish your pie off.

**6. I'm wavelength dioxide if rain opens. Sulphur think yeah. Living in roadwork dirt. Maybe spill system behaving to world finish.**

And they don't finish nothing it's always like this. PEDESTRIANS CERDDWYR. Energy drink can in roadwork dirt. She's happy where she is though isn't she. In proposing a poetry of coal, it worries me that coal energy is still the biggest threat to the climate. Carbon dioxide the most prevalent of the greenhouse gases fuelling climate change. A third of all carbon dioxide emissions comes from coal. Don't pick them up. I'm not I'm having a look. Litter bin on its side, shard of paving still stuck to the bottom. Sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxides create acid rain and smog. Mercury infiltrates the food chain and attacks the human nervous system. Toxic levels of heavy metals. I'm interested in the concept of resilience as a way of coping with ecological crisis. Resilience is the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and retain its basic function and structure. If a system changes too much it crosses a threshold and begins behaving in a different way. Is my poetry analogous to the forces driving climate change? Collage pushes language to the thresholds. Destabilising habitual patterns. Toppling stable meanings into new basins of attraction. But I think Wednesday is the dead day more now these days. I was at this what was it Latin American thing Mo was there do you remember. On a different wavelength and that I'm like fair enough then if you're not down with how I roll. Resilience is maintained by diversity, flexibility, keeping options open. The free market is based on efficiency, optimization, specialization. This reduces diversity and resilience. Makes the system more vulnerable to shocks. Collage is a way of keeping language flexible. Making it less dependent on a particular pattern of behaviour, a particular set of conditions, or basin of attraction. Maybe now more than ever we need ways of thinking and writing that are able to contain indeterminacies. See you Saturday Gar you over Saturday yeah Saturday. When its loosely linked elements fail, the poem has a chance to re-organise. Trace, are you down here tomorrow 'cause he wants to go up there see. The more variations available, the greater the ability to respond to shocks. To change as the world changes. Is there a cut through or do you have to go up by the YMCA? Maybe this is why we need collage now. So of course on a Thursday I got to wait. Why it seems the most suitable method for me today. I'll tell you something for nothing now.

## **Zones of the Coalfield Interior 3: alienation nostalgia**

### **1. Bass in the undergrounds lit by head. Figures moving to reverbed car radio. Rows of prerecorded voices. The air grips the premise.**

Green light haze. Roundabout arrowsigns. At the crossing island I listen to muffled car radio. The supermarket up ahead. Only the bass in the voice audible. White light rectangles. Sounds like a choir. Figures moving inside. Would you let me see beneath your beautiful. Eczema-frosted fingers tap the words into mobile. Trying to get my head around what I'm trying to say in these coalfield essays. Headache chill. Restate the premise: I use collage techniques in my writing and also find myself attracted to the ambience of certain places. The air grips the back of my neck. Saliva cold in my throat. Find connections between the two. Crossing the road I look up at the huge illuminated letters. The floating apostrophe. Up in the window a woman with dyed brown curls sups a cup and turns the pages of the Daily Mail. I use collage to say things I didn't know I was going to say. To allow words to combine in different orders without my control. In the underground car park, rows of aluminium shells, number plates. Trolleys lit by headlights. I seem to find certain places atmospheric. Train stations, bus stations, service stations, supermarket cafeterias. Seems to be about things being taken out of their usual contexts, similar to collage. A man on a bicycle carries his shopping between his teeth. A multipack of crisps and a pack of white rolls. Seems to be about defamiliarisation, alienation effects. Half naked child crawls on the parcel shelf of a Corsa. But my aestheticisation of alienation seems dubious. Should I really take pleasure in this? Isn't alienation a negative thing? The automatic doors open to reverbed chatter of prerecorded voices: please stand still ... please be prepared ... sefwch ... and hold the handrail ... to push your trolley ... barod ... whilst travelling ... off the walkway ... os gwelwch yn dda.

### **2. Lift a grey day. Shave the store. Penny change, estrange. I sit by financial exchange. Social interaction to reverbed chill.**

Fishfinger smell. Slide my tray along the rails. This way babe. Soft drink taps: Tango, Pepsi, 7-up. Lift a plate of carrot cake from the fridge. Coffee machine whirs. Yes please love and a spoon. Scan the menu: filter coffee, americano, latte, cappuccino, espresso. I order a large black filter coffee. Three fifty four all together love please. Do you have a Nectar card. Sometimes I have an americano but there's no difference. Penny change. Your black filter's over there. I sit by the window. Chocolate leather seats. Laminated circle tables. Why am I attracted to these lonely spaces? Are they alienated spaces? Estranged from what was familiar, as Olson says. Shave the carrot cake with my fork. Am I alienated? Are we all alienated? Lick crumbs off lips, icing off teeth. Maybe collage is a kind of alienation. Bertolt Brecht's alienation effects. Viktor Shklovsky's defamiliarisation. Art makes the familiar strange, estranges us from the familiar. Pincer crumbs off tray with

fingers. Have we become estranged from the familiar? What a grey day not a gay day a grey day. Girl in a black baseball cap with coffee cup on it carries a tray of empty plates. Lost our connection to some more real experience of life? Boy in a blue shirt sweeps the floor. Don't go browsing round the store now. Pink banners on the windows 25% off. Big wall poster photo close-ups: coffee froth, pastry swirls, batter bubbles. All our cod is line caught from sustainable sources. British flour. I've brought the list with me brought the list with me. One brown one white. All our coffee has been Fairtrade, organic and Rainforest Alliance since 2006. 100% Arabica. Packaged experience. Pack everyone into the air-hangar canteen. Social activity becomes a commodity. Reduces its creative power. Alright you've seen something have you. Bearded man folds a Telegraph. The girl sprays a table with pink liquid. Well we got that one we had last night. Cos we never decided. Social interaction mediated by financial exchange. But can experience ever be unmediated? I can't imagine it. I eat too quickly. When I finish I feel sick but my face relaxes. I sit back. Sip my scalding bowl of black coffee. I try to understand what alienation means and it makes me depressed. To be alienated you have to be alienated from something and I don't know what it is I'm meant to be alienated from. I can't fully accept any past condition of humanity or ordinary self within me to be alienated from. But then if I don't feel alienated, am I just accepting of the society I live in? A store phone burbles. Cake crumbs fuse to a solid wedge in my gut. A female singer on the radio keeps repeating two notes. I feel so tired. Two-syllable words I can't make out. How can I write anything? I recognise the tune but can't remember it.

**3. Tannoy voice calls someone in the glimpse. Scooping cardboard refrain dots. I'm going to these lonely shadows of carrot cake. Chocolated space.**

White rain dots the floor-to-ceiling windows. Reflected rows of fluorescent bulbs. Lampposts crane over the roads. Hooded traffic lights. Hillside windows. Petrol prices blipped in red: 129.9, 137.9. The supermarket logo streaks backwards through the windows of passing cars. I wonder if alienation could have a positive aspect. Ballard's dystopias become attractive. I'm excited when I find places that remind me of them. High corrugated metal ceiling. Dangling white fluorescent tubes. Multi-hazy shadows on the glittery tiles. It's a huge all time. And I do you just don't see me do it. A young family with cardboard Pepsi cups. A boy and girl in school uniform, the girl sucking a chewy lolly, the boy looking at his mobile phone. Did that go on the floor. There's something lonely about it all that I like. I don't know why. That airport ambience. There must be something wrong with me. The rustle of forks. Headlights go in different directions on the roundabout. Tannoy voice calls someone to the customer service desk. Cars pull up to the lights. Shapes of figures in the dark behind windscreens. Crockery clatters. Brian Eno's Music For Airports. Disembodied piano loops intersect. Things going on independently of each other in the same space. Everyone in their auto-pods waiting at night roundabouts. Or huddled at isolated tables in floodlit supermarket cafeterias, scooping forkfuls of carrot cake into our mouths. Dystopias depict a negative world to suggest the possibility of its opposite. Maybe now we don't believe in that possibility. What was negative becomes aesthetic. Alienation becomes pleasurable. A glimpse through bus windows of people sitting in the lit-up carriage as it zips

down the sliproad. Man lounging arm on headrest. Alienation is habit breaking. Things become habitual and I stop noticing them, so experiencing them out of context makes me pay attention to them again. Allows me to look at things as not natural but constructed. As something that can be changed. Not necessarily that it gives access to a more real experience. Not necessarily breaking through to some lost reality. I think what I enjoy about reading collage poetry is that it doesn't try to tell me something. It allows me to make what I want of it. Puts me in an active, creative role as a reader rather than a passive, receptive one. My head aches from the carrot cake. A keyboard refrain keeps repeating like a video game. She went down there. No for everything. A descending series of chimes then the tannoy voice: someone to contact 301. Well never mind but um.

#### **4. Crossing familiarising pavements of context. Michel de Certeau says to loops intersect. Meets my eye as he munches from their identities.**

Kids in hooded sweaters sit on the leather settees with their phones. Should I give up or should I just keep chasing pavements even if they lead nowhere. Echoey indistinct voices. Michel de Certeau says to walk is to lack a place. The immediacy of encounter, before we can place what we are experiencing. To place something is to define it, recognise it, mark its boundaries, map its territories. Like my sons there. So in the end. Plastic trays clack. A man in glasses meets my eye as he munches his meal and we look away. Colleague announcement. Are we losing our sense of familiarity as our day-to-day lives become more globally connected, more mobile and less rooted? Collage's defamiliarising function would seem to mimic that process. I don't know if greater familiarity is the answer though. To me it seems like the world is becoming more familiar not less. Sometimes feels like everything is too mapped out. Less chance of having that experience of encounter, of lacking a place. Did you just. It's like this year now. Trolleys of carrier bags parked in bays. Man holds up The Sun. KIDNAP GANG IN PLOT TO CASTRATE BEIBER. I said I haven't been well enough. But he works for Tesco's so uh. What I like about collage poetry is that I can experience something without knowing what it is or what it means. In that sense, collage might mimic the experience of encounter. The sensation of walking around not being able to process straightaway all the things that are happening. Being continually in the act of placing. You what love. Knives and forks glint. My neighbour come in I look at the clock and it was five to one. Yorkshire puddings held aloft on trays. Yes I am absolutely shattered. But in removing boundaries and territories defamiliarisation leads to loss of identity. People displaced from their cultures either try to hold onto their identities or become assimilated into the dominant culture. The deterritorialised re-territorialise. The defamiliarised gets re-familiarised. Could all available colleagues please go to the centre aisle thank you. Guy in fluorescent orange waistcoat and black baseball cap wheels a cage packed with cardboard and binbags. I find when I read a collage text that I do a surface reading where I'm just enjoying the sounds and shapes of the words without trying to understand what it means. Then at some point I want to try to understand and make connections, to place things, map the boundaries and territories. Trying to think of why I write collage poetry makes me miserable, but making the poem I feel relaxed. But then I have to abstract from it, think about the wider

concepts, wonder what it means. See that tall building there just to the right of that. Tray of metal teapots clinks onto table. One kid shows another something on his mobile. Ceiling lights swirl in my watery coffee. I said in there somewhere, somewhere.

**5. Empty brown curled in the word's throat. The ambience could eat. Not necessarily breaking a salad. Peeled to be possible.**

Girl in white net hat mops the leather seats. Blue and white striped cloth. Something like that it is innit. Don't matter what time of the year. An alternative to Bertolt Brecht's alienation effects comes from George Brecht: The difference between a chair by Duchamp and one of my chairs is that Duchamp's chair is on a pedestal and mine can still be used. The spray gun spits mist. The label says D10. Tattoo on her wrist: a lizard. 1962 Alison Knowles performs 'Make a Salad', which involves preparing a salad which the audience can eat. 1992 Rikrit Tiravanija performs 'Untitled (Free)', which involves preparing a curry in the gallery for the audience to eat. No ice cream here – I got water. Clap of wedged heels on plastic tiles. Snowy frothed lattes. Well they didn't have any did they. If Duchamp made the everyday into art by removing the object's function, these artists bring the function back to art. It could be an act of defamiliarisation: taking an everyday activity out of its usual context. But this doesn't seem to be important for Tiravanija. He prepares the food so the audience can eat it. He makes things for people to use. To create a social situation. I thought right. I honestly believed. Man shakes a paper tube of demerara. Chocolate mossed froth. Defamiliarisation suggests that life needs to be transformed into art, but artists like Brecht, Knowles and Tiravanija suggest that art needs to be made more like life. Life is not something familiar and boring that needs to be transformed by art. It's just as complex and perhaps even more interesting. Girl in apron squirts table, folds newspaper and puts it in rack. No nothing I don't have anything. Blonde ponytail curled in hairnet. I'm not entitled to it. I find Derrida's concept of hauntology useful here. The original utopia never was real. That original truthful experience we were supposedly alienated from always was an illusion, a ghost. But just because a more truthful experience might not be possible doesn't mean we shouldn't question, challenge, oppose the current state of things. If we no longer believe in alienation, maybe there's a nostalgia for alienation. The promise of a utopia that can never, should never arrive, still haunts us. I said look. Triangular cardboard sandwich cartons. Crumpled paper napkins on plates. But it's not as if. It's like I said. An alienation effect that alienates us from the current illusion without any belief in a world that's not an illusion. A defamiliarisation that recognises that the everyday is not familiar and allows for its unfamiliarity. So that everyday life doesn't go unnoticed. Collage makes me aware of the here and now. Empty brown crusted cups. Wedges of tomato on side of plate. I'm going now but you're coming Sunday are you. Yeah but like I say. Peeled pot of Lurpak. Listen now I'll see you next time. Not so much spaces where we experience our activities out of context, but spaces where small moments of social interaction can take place. Micro-utopias within the dystopia. Train stations, bus stations, service stations, supermarket cafeterias. In floodlit enclaves we gather alone and in small groups. Till shrapnel tinkles. The spray gun whippers. Can I get you anything else.

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